



Webinar #4: From Research to Practice: On-the-Ground Lessons From a Case Study on Effective Early Learning

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The Precursor to this Project

- ◆ An NCCP policy brief: Pathways to Early School Success: Effective Preschool Curricula and Teaching Strategies (Issue Brief No. 2)
http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_668.html
- ◆ The brief is based on emerging research and the consensus from an invitational meeting of expert researchers, practitioners, and policy leaders about what low-income preschool-age children need to succeed in school.



The Next Step

- ◆ We were interested in how research is being translated into practice in a spectrum of early learning classrooms (school-based Title I preschool programs, Head Start, private community center-based child care, and home-based programs).
- ◆ What facilitates and what gets in the way of using the research to improve teaching practice and promote children's achievement? What does effective early learning look like in examples on the ground?



The Case Study Project

- ◆ We focused on the 4 effective early learning strategies identified in the NCCCP brief:
 - Intentional Curricula
 - Teaching Supports
 - Connections with Families and Communities
 - Monitoring Progress



The Sites

- ◆ We selected 6 “exemplar” site serving low- income kids known to incorporate all 4 of the strategies and observed programs and interviewed administrators, teachers, parents, and community partners.
 - Mini U in Dayton, OH
 - LAUP in Los Angeles, CA
 - TEEM in Houston, TX
 - Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), MD
 - Independence School District (ISD), MO
 - Philadelphia School District, PA



Strategy 1: Intentional Curriculum-The Research Lesson

- ◆ “An intentional curriculum is research-based, emphasizes teachers actively engaged with children, includes attention to social and regulatory skills, is responsive to cultural diversity and English language learners, is not teacher-proof, and requires new ways to measure classroom quality, teacher effectiveness, and student progress.”
 - (Definition of Intentional Curricula from the NCCP brief)



Intentional Curriculum-Findings from the Ground

- ◆ Most of the curricula in the sites are research-based and follow state standards/guidelines, but insuring they are a good match with students and families is a challenge (ELL, culture, special needs).
- ◆ Early learning curricula attends to both academic skills and emotional development, behavioral self-regulation, and social skills on a daily basis.
- ◆ Implementing a consistent preschool curriculum over time and aligning it with Kindergarten is easier said than done!



Strategy 2: Teaching Supports -The Research Lessons

- ◆ “Teachers are the critical mediators through which learning occurs.” (NCCP brief)
- ◆ There is limited research to definitively answer questions about what early learning teaching support strategies are effective
- ◆ Emerging research is showing that different types of supports have a direct impact on teacher practice, but few study the impact on children’s achievement.
- ◆ Conventional wisdom along with some emerging research suggest that less intense forms of training such as one-shot workshops are less effective, while more intense supports that are directly tied to actual classroom practice and focus on teacher-child interaction are more effective.



Teaching Supports-Findings from the Ground

- ◆ The amount and type of teaching supports varies widely, mostly due to limited resources so programs are finding creative ways to build in supports.
 - The ISD partnership with the University of Missouri allows Fellows and Interns from the School of Ed to provide on site coaching and model innovative practices to District teachers at no cost to the District.
 - Use Title I dollars to help support early childhood programs and services
 - Use Early/Head Start funds for learning coaches to work with teachers.
 - MO and PA have secured federal or private grants to pay for extra classroom supplies, library materials, computer technology, and teacher training.



Teaching Supports-Findings from the Ground

- ◆ MD allocates a disproportionately higher level of school funding to the schools serving the most low-income children; Pre-k and Kindergarten teachers of low-income can get a \$40.00 stipend for training; Teacher Cohorts in training create a support system with other early childhood colleagues.



Teaching Supports-Findings from the Ground

- ◆ Supports need to match teachers' levels of education and experience if they are going to participate and benefit from them.
 - Sites focus on developmentally appropriate practice and basic skills with new, less educated, or inexperienced teachers.
 - They also focus on how to increase language or math skills and higher order skills such as scaffolding and teachable moments when teachers are already highly skilled and experienced.
 - Mini U strongly encouraged all teachers to participate in training, even when there was some initial resistance.



Strategy 3. Connections with Families and Communities-The Research Lessons

- ◆ Research repeatedly demonstrates that reducing the achievement gap requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond efforts to improve what children know and can do during the preschool years.
- ◆ Involving families and communities is crucial, especially for low-income children who are most at-risk for school failure.



Connections with Families and Communities-Findings from the Ground

- ◆ There is a lot of outreach to involve parents but participation is mixed because they can't get off work, lack transportation, don't have child care for their younger children.
 - Mini U focuses on establishing relationships with parents (welcome in classrooms anytime, have breakfast/lunch) so they call and meet with the Education Coordinator or Center Director; Parent-Teacher conferences are held 3 times a year and set around parents' work schedules.
 - First 5 California has a mandatory 75% attendance/participation rate that must be maintained for children to remain in the program.



Connections with Families and Communities-Findings from the Ground

- ◆ Effective programs provide supports to help parents handle the stress they feel about how much their children need to know to before they start Kindergarten.
 - TEEM parents can take home book bags (Raising a Reader) to supplement what the children are learning during the day.
 - Montgomery County Public Schools worked with a parent to remove TV from their living room and make a library instead.
 - Every site offers home visiting to help both parents and children.



Connections with Families and Communities-Findings from the Ground

- ◆ These programs establish linkages with their local communities to supplement services.
 - 4 of First 5 LA's goals are about community links: safe places for children to live and play; affordable housing; educational attainment for families, and support for families and children with special needs.
 - Programs funded by Ohio's Early Learning Initiative must link families to community-based services-Mini U participates in the Child and Adult Food Program, incorporates Early Head Start in their centers, and has an ongoing contract with the local community mental health center.
 - The MCPS support the Judy Centers to provide screening and intervention referrals, train child care providers in the district curriculum, and lead kindergarten transition programs.



Strategy 4. Monitoring Progress-The Research Lessons

- ◆ The National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force created guidelines and made 3 recommendations for a system to assess early childhood programs and quality:
 1. Develop a unified system of early childhood education that includes a single, coherent system of standards, assessments, data, and professional development efforts across all categorical programs and funding streams.
 2. Align high-quality and comprehensive standards, curriculum, and assessments as a continuum from prekindergarten through grade 3.
 3. Assure that all child and program assessments are valid and reliable, meet high psychometric standards, and are designed for their intended purpose.

Taking stock: Assessing and improving early childhood learning and program quality. (2007). Report of the National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force. Washington, DC. www.earlyedaccountability.org



Monitoring Progress-Findings from the Ground

- ◆ Technology can facilitate or impede how programs monitor quality and progress: it helps make it easy to collect and use data, but it comes at a cost most programs cannot afford.
 - TEEM teachers are trained to assess language and literacy skills using a handheld PDA. Three times a year teachers enter information which is synced to a secure website and generates both individual child and class level reports they can use to see how individual students, groups of students, and the class as a whole are performing.
 - “I was nervous since I’m no techie but I got the hang of it pretty fast and it’s much better than writing everything down in long hand. There’s all this data and you push a button and up pop ideas for specific activities you can do to help each kid catch up in areas where they are behind-it’s really pretty fantastic.” (TEEM teacher)



Monitoring Progress-Findings from the Ground

- ◆ PA has an electronic data system; Mini U recently built their up.
- ◆ The ISD has a more limited MIS which they see as a hardship: "Teachers are already squeezed for time so paperwork to track children's progress is an extra burden. Principals can't easily compile data they need to make decisions about curricula and programs since there isn't a connection between preschool, Head Start, and family service data with the state department of education's data that the district uses starting in kindergarten." (School Principal)



Monitoring Progress-Findings from the Ground

- ◆ Administrators and teachers get most excited about using data to improve quality and classroom practice.
 - First 5 LA sponsors assessments of child outcomes and of implementation to improve programs. Given their population, one study looks at assessments for children from linguistically diverse backgrounds.
 - In the MCPS, all preK teachers meet together to analyze data, discuss how to use it in their lesson plans, develop teaching strategies for specific children, plan for individual and group instruction, and monitor children's progress. The data is also used to set up Teaching Cohorts to guide teacher development.



Monitoring Progress-Findings from the Ground

- ◆ All of the sites feel strong pressure to monitor children's achievement.
 - In TEEM, achievement is monitored 3 times a year in early reading and literacy, math, and social skills and shows if children's skills are "developed" or "still developing."
 - MCPS tracks child progress through the Maryland Model for School Readiness Work Sampling System, a teacher observation tool used with all prek students.



Monitoring Progress-Findings from the Ground

- ◆ Mini U uses the assessment that goes with Creative Curriculum, which shows how groups of children perform in global developmental areas and 50 objectives; they also use 2 other mandated language/literacy assessments.
- ◆ PreK Counts in PA monitors children's progress in positive social emotional skills, acquisition and use of knowledge, and use of appropriate behaviors to meet needs; Teachers conduct observational assessments linked to the state's early learning standards twice a year.



Conclusions

- ◆ Practice in exemplary classrooms does incorporate lessons learned from research about effective early learning strategies—it is possible to do!
- ◆ Everyone feels better when all 4 strategies are implemented as a package rather than only a few in isolation, and when these come from a mix of early learning programs and community-based supports.



Recommendations: Overall

- ◆ Establish policies and the funding necessary to support early learning programs that incorporate all 4 strategies: an intentional curriculum, effective teaching supports, connections with families and communities, and a system for monitoring progress.



Recommendations: Curriculum

- ◆ Support curriculum that intentionally incorporates the components of the definition by supplementing content or implementation of off the shelf curricula.
- ◆ Support curriculum that is evidence-based and fits the cultural, ethnic, and language characteristics of students, parents, and teachers.
- ◆ Allocate public funds to develop integrated preschool through third grade curriculum.
- ◆ Provide incentives for programs to use curriculum for at least 2 years before making changes.



Recommendations: Teaching Supports

- ◆ Support professional development (PD) tailored to teacher's level of education, training, experience, and beliefs about child development.
- ◆ Support coaching/mentoring, both in person and online, that is sustained over time and includes expert and peer consultation.
- ◆ Support research and evaluation to enhance PD by comparing different types and amounts with the impacts on teachers' skills and children's outcomes.



Recommendations: Parent and Community Connections

- ◆ Provide multiple ways and opportunities to communicate with parents so they understand the skills and abilities that are expected in Kindergarten and what they can do to help their children at home.
- ◆ Provide incentives for early learning programs and community based organizations to collaborate so children and families have access to services that early learning programs alone cannot provide.



Recommendations: Monitoring Progress

- ◆ Allocate resources for electronic data and information systems that are teacher and administrator friendly and connect assessment with curriculum, specific teaching strategies, early learning guidelines, and state standards.
- ◆ Provide supports for teacher training on assessment measures and the technology needed to collect data, use data to plan instruction and guide teaching practice, and to promote increased achievement for children.



This project is dedicated to Jane Knitzer, the Executive Director of the National Center for Children in Poverty up until February 2009. Jane's commitment to improving the lives of low-income children has been an inspiration to countless families, students, colleagues, and decision makers. She passionately and faithfully served as a champion for better policies and sufficient funding at the highest levels of government and for better programs and services "on the ground." We are eternally grateful for her vision, leadership, mentorship, and friendship.